Spring 2015

Understanding Martha in Light of Nineteenth-Century Womanhood Ideals (1900)

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(January –April1900)

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2015

Two main womanhood ideals spanned the nineteenth and early twentieth century. True Womanhood and New Womanhood were distinct, starkly contrasting one another. Martha McMillan's life bridges the two eras of womanhood, her writings illustrating her own subjectivity in light of the two ideals.

The True Woman

The Cult of True Womanhood defined the female ideal in antebellum America. The concept espoused the notion that "womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 151). The nineteenth century expression of sexual stereotypes asserted that men were less religious, more brutish, and that women alone were truly religious. All other "virtues" followed from this piety. If a woman was pious, thinking most highly of God, then she would subsequently have access to all other virtues. Men were encouraged to seek a woman of piety, because it was the only way they could be sure that her purity was protected. Religion was a woman's "divine right," to which she was "peculiarly susceptible" (Welter 151). The idea was that men were less susceptible to religion and needed a woman to persuade them towards it.

A woman's purity, submissiveness, and domesticity were just as important to her character as was her piety. The common assumption, among both men and women, was that a woman could not be truly desirable unless she was truly pious. All other virtues extended from that one. If a woman was pious, she could also be pure. Societal ideas held that the absence of

purity in a woman was “unnatural and unfeminine,” and without it, a woman was not a woman at all - she was fallen (Welter 154).

Submissiveness followed naturally from piety, too. Religion, Welter notes, was an important tool used to keep women in their “proper sphere” (153). Women were expected to be submissive because, more or less, that was the way of things, the divinely appointed order (Welter 159). Society taught women to revel in their feelings of weakness and timidity. They were meant to be this way, to be dependent on their husbands (Welter 159). In fact, women were impressed upon to view this dependency as a gift. They had the ability to passively respond to situations, rather than to have authority over them. When they did want some semblance of influence, they exercised authority by means of persuasion (Welter 161). Submission necessitated that women make themselves small: they “should ‘become as little children’ and ‘avoid a controversial spirit’” (Welter 161). They were meant to bear it.

The first three virtues culminated in the last: domesticity. A woman’s place was the home. The work of the home - the cooking, cleaning, caring - was seen as an art, as an act of supreme love, even as a science. This role was tied especially to her piety: in her cooking, cleaning, and caring, a woman brought her husband back to God (Welter 162). In the home, women could fulfill their two most important duties: to be useful and beautiful (Welter 163).

True Womanhood persisted as the female norm from 1820 into the 1860s. A common proclamation from the pulpit appealed to men to seek a virtuous woman. Implicit in this tone was the appeal to women - to *be* virtuous. But the late nineteenth century brought a period of change. The tide would soon bring in a New Woman.

The New Woman

Daughters who grew up during the mid- to late-nineteenth century were the first to question their mothers' ideals of True Womanhood. Coming of age near the turn of the century saw "the late-century woman [amending] the concept of femininity bequeathed to her by her mother and [arriving] at a new understanding of 'true womanhood' consistent with her new material conditions" (Theriot 77). According to Theriot, "in the late nineteenth century, female control replaced female suffering as the cornerstone of femininity" (77).

Economic, social, and political changes swept the nation in the 1870s and 1880s. Cities were large; immigration brought waves of newcomers; and material gains meant a different kind of life awaited young women. Writing in 1891, Mary A. Livermore expressed excitement for the new age of women's education and entrance into professions previously open to men only. She notes that in many of these professions, men and women served alongside one another, men "graciously [acknowledging] the practical wisdom and virtue [women] bring to their duties" (124).

Likewise, new policy changes afforded women more power, even when they were married. They were able to control land, able to gain custody of their children in a divorce, and could send their children to public school, lessening the burden on mothers to be everything for everyone (Theriot 80). Women could also take a more public role in everyday life, joining societies and clubs, because they weren't expected to be at home all the time, always cooking, cleaning, and caring for children.

A major development in the female sense of self occurred in the late nineteenth century. The physical education movement turned the female frailty ideal upside-down, instead giving a sense of power, ability, and strength to women (Theriot 81). Advancements in medicine allowed

women greater control over their own bodies, weakening the need for dependence on and submission to male authority. According to Theriot, “late-century women experienced the cared-for female body as naturally healthy, not feeble, and saw suffering as an aberration, not as an inevitable consequence of being female… [they] viewed health and strength as essential to female beauty, a concept totally at odds with the earlier idealization of frail, pale, listless femininity, [attributing] illness and weakness to socialization, not to nature” (81-82). Advances in birth control and understanding of reproduction also afforded women more control over their bodies (Theriot 90) Women no longer had to define themselves by the children they birthed, adding to their health and overall sense of worth beyond their function as vessels of boys-who-would-be-men.

New Womanhood progressed into the twentieth century, eventually giving way to the woman of the 1920s. This changing tide of womanhood, while important, was not black and white. In the study of one particular woman of the nineteenth century, whose married life began just as the New Woman appeared, we see the influences of both concepts of womanhood.

Martha: Her Own Woman

The year 1900 represents a pivotal point in both American history and in the life of Martha McMillan. As the century turned, Martha was in her mid-fifties, thirty years into her marriage, and was the mother of adult children. The idea of New Womanhood had already been established, but Martha was of the generation brought up under the ideal of True Womanhood. As such, throughout the first four months of her 1900 journal, Martha exhibits traits of both types of womanhood. She doesn’t define herself completely as a certain type of woman; instead, Martha proves that even though she exhibits traits of True Womanhood and New Womanhood, ultimately she doesn’t have to define herself in relation to anyone: she’s just Martha.

True Womanhood's key tenant is piety. Martha embodies this trait, frequently writing about the text of church sermons, the attendance of Sabbath School, and her religious reflections on everyday experiences. She frequently notes that her son Paul asks questions about the Sabbath School lessons, and she answers them for him. Understanding True Womanhood's emphasis on religion as woman's jurisdiction illuminates Martha's reasoning for placing so much value on it.

Martha was also quite domestic, spending much of her time at home, supervising the hired help, cleaning, and making household necessities. Over the course of a few weeks in February, Martha notes that she made at least three feather mattresses. She also documents her progress on spring cleaning through the month of April, a task that her daughter Clara helped accomplish. Because Martha would have come of age during the reign of True Womanhood, some of the characteristics of a True Woman are apparent in her writings, including piety and domesticity.

However, Martha doesn't fit neatly into the mold of True Womanhood. Martha placed a great deal of emphasis on education. Almost every entry for every weekday in the first four months of 1900 contain a note about who is in school, and where. She takes pride in this, as a New Woman would have. She herself is educated, often mentioning books she has read, meetings she has attended, or conversations she has had.

Martha also was a member and attendee of multiple societies mentioned throughout early 1900. She advocated for women's rights as part of the WCTU, attended the Young Persons' Meeting at church, and went to many congregational prayer meetings. Martha's involvement in her community extend from the New Womanhood ideals she embodies. She often goes out, visiting friends and relatives - she isn't contained to the home, because she is strong enough to go about on her own. She isn't frail or weak, but independent.

Understanding True and New Womanhood is essential to understanding Martha McMillan. If one knows of the trends and stereotypes of women at different points in time, one can tell that Martha doesn't fit neatly into either. She doesn't define herself as a certain type of woman. She loves her children and writes about them every day, but she isn't "Mother Martha." She seems to embrace her duties as a housewife, but she isn't "James McMillan's Wife." Likewise, Martha values education, but she isn't a teacher or a professional. She is a mover, traveling about to different societies, calling on her friends and hosting and attending parties, but she is no socialite. Instead, in these journals, and in the first four months of 1900 in particular, we see a woman who does what she does, likes what she likes, values what she values - all because it makes her *Martha.* She is *herself,* unbound by the constraints of any stereotype of womanhood. Her unique place in history affords her the opportunity to bridge the gap, but so does her personality and her security in her own worth. Martha is her own woman, and for that, she makes no apologies.

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